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“Out Here a Man Settles His Own Problems”

Learning from John Wayne

Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract In this brief essay, I meditate on the experience of watching Westerns and other TV and film genres with my father. I focus on the figure of Tom Doniphon, the John Wayne character in the film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, as I consider the links between what my father and I watched together and how I learned, or didn't learn, to find my way through my adolescent troubles.

Keywords: *fathers, sons, masculinity, Tom Doniphon, bullying*

Before writing this paper I didn't know for sure that I ever saw *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962), where John Wayne's maverick good guy, Tom Doniphon, a 'liminal hero', as Chris Poulos (2012) terms him, tells James Stewart's effete lawyer, Ransom Stoddard, that 'out here a man settles his own problems'. I may have seen it. I have now.

If I had watched that film, it would have been with my father one weekday evening, probably at about 7 p.m., when Westerns were shown. I would be about 13. Fourteen, maybe. At home from boarding school for the holidays. He would be sitting on the floor of my parents' bedroom. I would be lying on their bed. He would be busy, dealing with bills and correspondence – everything laid out in neat piles and ordered rows upon the 3 foot by 2 foot patch of carpet that served as his desk. He had a study and a proper wooden desk, but this is where he would attend to what needed doing—with us, he on the floor, legs folded, we on the bed. Maybe it would be just him and me, the two of us, or perhaps my brother and sister too. My mother might have been there, watching and not watching. She would have preferred something on another channel, the travel documentary or the one on Richard III. She was there, because it's where we were.

Dad and I – and whoever, but I remember it as Dad and me – would watch Westerns. And James Bond. Especially Sean Connery, of course. As the years progressed, our broadening tastes would come to include *Kojak*, *Starsky and Hutch*,

Columbo, *Cagney and Lacey*, *Charlie's Angels*, or their British equivalents, *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals*. These Brit shows portrayed hard men in hard, downtrodden, downbeat towns, cops working in pairs, gruff, violent, snarling, indicative of angry 1970s and 1980s UK.

On Saturday afternoons, for Dad and me it would be the wrestling. Always at 4 p.m. Always on ITV. The British version of wrestling. Black and white, in downtrodden, downbeat halls in rundown English towns. Wrestlers like the heels – the baddies – Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks against the blue-eyes – goodies – Kendo Nagasaki and Mick McManus. Or maybe Mick McManus was a heel. Big Daddy was a heel for a time and turned himself into a blue-eye.

But I digress. Or perhaps I don't. Goodies and baddies. This is the world that my father and I inhabited when we watched whatever it was we watched. There were good guys and bad guys. The good-looking, well-muscled, strong but ethical wrestlers against the ugly, fat, hirsute, rule-breaking wrestlers. The flawed but decent cops, Starsky and Hutch et al., against the murderous baddies. In the Brit versions, this distinction was more blurred – the cops themselves worked on the edge of both the law and of what might count as 'good', but we rooted for them and their subversive, anti-establishment, get-the-baddies-at-all-costs, ends-justify-the-means ethical position. Though I doubt they thought they had ethical positions.

Black characters didn't figure often. And if they did, they were the light relief. The grass, Huggy Bear, and his loping nonchalance. In the man-cop shows, the women were pretty and bland. In the woman-cop shows, things were more complicated. Pretty, bland, and tough in *Charlie's Angels*, more ordinary and grittier in *Cagney and Lacey*.

And the Westerns – those I remember, or the aspects of those I remember – seemed always to have the equivalent of wrestling's blue-eyes and heels, goodies and baddies. The heroes were strong, rugged men protecting children; pretty, skirted women; and good but ineffectual men from ruthless, mean men. Horses, cattle, and dogs played their bit parts, all set amongst a pitiless, mean landscape and its downbeat, downtrodden, rundown towns. Sometimes, most times, the baddies were the 'redskins', 'Indians', who were silent, stealthy assassins or unruly hordes on horseback surrounding and circling wagons containing terrified, blameless (white) citizens. The war-painted, bare-torsoed warriors – the Sioux, the Commanchees – issued their shrill war-cries and swept in in a seemingly chaotic stream to kill and scalp their victims with impassive delight. Late, but not too late for the characters that mattered, across the hills would come the cavalry or its equivalent, led by Custer or some other white, handsome hero.

I may be misremembering. But anyway, I was oblivious at the time to the political assumptions I was buying into. I watched for the escape, because it was home not boarding school, because I could, because there was no TV at school. And no Dad. Because, for those few weeks I could sit and watch TV with my father and the world would be simple and life's problems would be resolved within 90 minutes. I watched wanting to be more like the troubled, tragic outsider Doniphon than the hapless, though successful, establishment blue-eye Ransom. I watched alongside my strong, good, oblivious father, yearning for John Wayne to come back to school and help me like he helped Ransom. There, by my dad, I could try to find the Tom Doniphon in me who could settle his own problems. But I never could, and Doniphon was wrong and should have known he was wrong, given it was he who came to Ransom's aid. When the Liberty Valances amongst my peers took pot shots at my blithering Ransom-esque character, there was no Doniphon, no John Wayne, in the shadows firing them down for me. Out there a boy couldn't settle his own problems, or this boy couldn't, nor could the boys I had, in my time, ruthlessly and systematically taken it out on.

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About the Author

Jonathan Wyatt is senior lecturer in counselling and psychotherapy at The University of Edinburgh. His recent books include *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Absence and Presence, Love and Loss*, co-edited with Tony Adams and published by Sense, and *Collaborative Writing as Inquiry*, co-edited with Jane Speedy and published by Cambridge Scholars.